

Vanishing Culture: No Film Left Unscanned

by Rick Prelinger

Soon after the cinema was born in the 1890s, a few visionaries realized that film could become one of the most vivid and engaging means of recording history. But when they proposed creating archives to collect and preserve moving images, no one seemed to respond. Most movie studios treated films as expendable objects to be discarded after their theatrical runs, and most collections that actually survived were hidden in specialized spaces: newsreel archives, stock footage libraries, universities, and collectors' basements.

In the 1930s, a handful of courageous archivists in Europe and America inaugurated the modern film archives movement. Asserting that cinema should be seen not only as valuable documentation but as an art in its own right, they collected as best they could. But they encountered great resistance. They fought pushback from copyright holders who saw archives as a violation of their ownership, aesthetes and government bureaucrats who considered movies to be vulgar commercialism and unworthy of preservation, and fire inspectors who treated film as explosive hazmat. Ultimately, film's immense popularity won out. In half a century, the first four film archives expanded to hundreds, and today it's impossible to count how many thousands of archives collect film, video, and digital materials.

But film has always been hard to collect and preserve. Until the 1970s, film was generally made from organic gelatin bonded to various forms of plastic that inevitably decomposed. Much but not all pre-1951 35mm film was doubly vulnerable, made from cellulose nitrate stock that if heated or exposed to flame could burn rapidly or explode. Film, therefore, was and still is a deeply inconvenient object, requiring very cool and very dry storage in order to survive. Archives fires throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have destroyed large collections, and almost every film is still at risk from decay and decomposition.

For many years the gold standard of film preservation was film-to-film copying coupled with restoration—aiming to preserve films as their makers intended, and trying to preserve the theatrical film experience. This process is difficult and expensive. The turn toward digital technologies came in the 1990s, and now almost all film preservation is digitally-based, even if the product is a long-lasting film print for storage projection.

To think about film preservation is to think about much more than what we call movies. While to most people film and cinema describe the stories we see in theaters or on television, feature films are really a special case. The majority of films are “useful cinema”—films produced to do a job, to sell, train, teach, promote, document, convince. Almost none of these films have been preserved. And the supermajority of films, totalling in the billions, are home movies. Home movies—8mm, Super 8, 9.5mm 16mm and even 35mm—are ancestors of the videos we shot on camcorders and now capture on cell phones. We might think of each home movie as a

pixel in a giant collective documentary spanning a hundred years, endless films picturing family, friends, travels, rituals and celebrations. Home movies picture our own experience of daily life, work and leisure, rather than narratives cooked up by commercial studios. And every home movie is evidence: a gesture of permanence. While there are large collections of home movies, most still live with the families that made them, often in damp basements or hot attics, all vulnerable to deterioration and the vagaries of a changing climate. Of all films, home movies are the closest to our hearts, the most charismatic, the most fascinating—and they are in the greatest jeopardy.

Fortunately, we now have digital tools and workflows to extend the life of film. While scanning film to produce digital files demands considerable skill, technology, and resources, it is more achievable than ever before. It's possible to digitize most films that have not completely decayed and turn these inconvenient reels into digital files that can be viewed, shared, studied, edited, and woven together with other images and sounds. It's now easy to take a film that may exist in only a single copy and share it around the world via the internet.

Beginning in 2000, Prelinger Archives collaborated with Internet Archive to digitize and offer thousands of useful films online, and since then our films have been seen and downloaded over 200 million times on the Internet Archive and arguably billions of times elsewhere. Our three-year collaboration with Filecoin Foundation for the Decentralized Web, now in progress, is allowing us to scan thousands of films (especially home movies) every year and make them available in a safer, decentralized environment where we hope they will survive for many years. While this is not classic film-to-film preservation creating restored film copies that sit on archival shelves, digital scans of films are likely to exist in many places, avoiding the vulnerability of unique copies in individual repositories. And the quality of digital scanning now exceeds the quality of film-to-film copying.

Perhaps most importantly, digital scans are easy to share. While film preservation should enable universal access to the sum of cinematic creativity, much film is enclosed by copyright or business restrictions. Most films held in archives are still not visible and even fewer are available for reuse. By scanning films that are out of copyright or have no surviving rightsholder, we can open up an immense reservoir of images, sounds and ideas for the makers of the present and the future. Scanning has made film preservation practical, and it's also enabled preservation of "smaller" films like home movies and useful films, which reveal evidence and truths absent from feature films and television.

No film left unscanned: this is our dream. We have the opportunity to preserve deteriorating films in digital form and make them available for viewing, reuse, and computation as never before. As thoughtful archivists have said for many years, "preservation without access is pointless." Digital scanning can and should enable both as it helps us to build moving and permanent memories.

About the author

[Rick Prelinger](#) is an archivist, filmmaker, writer and educator. He began collecting "ephemeral films" (films made for specific purposes at specific times, such as advertising, educational and industrial films; more recently called "[useful cinema](#)") in 1983. His collection of 60,000 films was acquired by [Library of Congress](#) in 2002, and since that time Prelinger Archives has again grown to include some 40,000 home movies and 7,000 other film items. Beginning in 2000, he partnered with [Internet Archive](#) to make a subset of the Prelinger Collection (now over 9,700 items) available online for free viewing, downloading and reuse. Prelinger Archives currently collaborates with Filecoin Foundation for the Decentralized Web to scan historical films and make them available online. His archival feature [Panorama Ephemera](#) (2004) played in venues around the world, and his feature project [No More Road Trips?](#) received a [Creative Capital grant](#) in 2012. His 30 [Lost Landscapes](#) participatory urban history projects have played to many thousands of viewers in San Francisco, Detroit, Oakland, Los Angeles, New York and elsewhere. He is a board member of [Internet Archive](#) and frequently writes and [speaks](#) on the future of archives. With [Megan Prelinger](#), he co-founded [Prelinger Library](#) in 2004, which continues to serve the needs of researchers, artists, activists and readers in downtown San Francisco. He is currently [Emerit Professor of Film & Digital Media](#) at University of California, Santa Cruz.

This essay is part of the Internet Archive's [Vanishing Culture](#) series, highlighting the power and importance of preservation in our digital age.